

# Designing tasks for developing complex language skills and cognitive competence in the distance learning of Slovak as a foreign language

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**Abstract.** The Slovak language is one of the less commonly taught languages, and its learners worldwide have few options in terms of its study and practice. One of them, however, is the [www.e-slovak.sk](http://www.e-slovak.sk) e-learning platform provided by the Studia Academica Slovaca Centre at the Comenius University Faculty of Arts in Bratislava, Slovakia. This article summarises a two year experience teaching Slovak in two tutored e-learning courses of e-slovak levels A1 and A2 (CEFR, 2001). The article focusses mainly on the tasks contributing to the development of productive communication skills (speaking and writing). We explored to what extent various language learning tasks are efficient in terms of developing complex language skills and engaging students' cognitive skills in accordance with Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy of teaching objectives.

**Keywords:** e-learning, language learning tasks, cognitive competence, revised Bloom's taxonomy.

## 1. Introduction

Learning a language usually means gradually developing all four fundamental language skills, i.e. receptive – listening comprehension and reading comprehension – and productive speaking and writing. It is crucial to provide sufficient space to students' balanced and complex development, which is a great challenge when designing and managing online language courses. For the purposes of this paper, we used an e-learning platform for Slovak as a foreign language, available at

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the website [www.e-slovak.sk](http://www.e-slovak.sk). Learners have to use various general knowledge, abilities, and skills to handle varied communication situations effectively (CEFR, 2001). We also consider as important the development of cognitive skills based on Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy. Thus, the research question in this study is which variables of tasks support the development of learners' speech and written production, and simultaneously stimulate their cognitive competence.

The data in this research are collected from the e-learning portal of the Slovak language in which tutor-supported courses for levels A1 and A2 are available. Data represent students' essays and recordings. We analysed the task and its impact on students' assignments. Both courses approximately correspond to the textbooks *Krížom-krážom – slovenčina A1* and *Krížom-krážom –slovenčina A2*. They consist of ten topic-based units, and each of them contains dialogues with new words, phrases, illustrations, and reading and listening, followed by self-evaluation exercises, a short final test, as well as two assignments, one recording and one essay. There are no course fees associated with the work in the e-slovak course.

## 2. Method

The participants of the research were 22 adults enrolled in the tutor-supported course e-slovak A1 in 2017, 62 people in the tutor-supported course e-slovak A1 in 2018, 17 people in the tutor-supported course e-slovak A2 in 2017, and 38 students in the tutor-supported course e-slovak A2 in 2018. They completed ten units in ten months. It means each group was supposed to write ten essays and create ten recordings, although the number of students in each group decreased during the course – the course finished with 50% of the students.

Tasks were bilingual (in Slovak and English) in the A1 course and monolingual (in the target language) in the A2 course. Tasks were appropriate for learner language skills (basic vocabulary and simple morphologic and syntactic features).

In our research, we compared the parameters of the recording and essay tasks and the resulting student assignments. We were inspired by the cognitive hypothesis (Robinson, 2005; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007) according to which pedagogic tasks should be designed, and then sequenced, for learners on the basis of increasing their cognitive complexity.

Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy provided a framework to think about the tasks and helped us to analyse them as far as teaching objectives and

aims were concerned. Within this framework, we analysed the tasks and how the instructions influenced students' essays and recordings using qualitative methods. Mostly, we aimed at two parameters: the length of the texts or recordings and the extent of developing the topic of the tasks. On the basis of this analysis the following criteria emerged.

### 3. Discussion

As we were focussed on designing tasks in order to support communicative language skills, based on the analysed recordings and essays, few criteria proved significant. We consider the following standards to be the most relevant.

Open-ended questions concerning the content provide a broad range of possibilities and ways in which students can answer them. There are no sub-questions which can incite the students to reply unequivocally and briefly. For instance, in the type of task such as *Introduce yourself* (*What is your name?*, *Where are you from?*, *How old are you?*, *What is your profession?*, *How are you?*), which contains few specific sub-questions, students tend to answer more stereotypically in comparison with the task, for example, *Who are you?*. This allows students to respond creatively in many ways.

Another type of question oriented to the students, that is learner-oriented tasks, offers students a huge space for self-expression. Students can compare their own life with others, and moreover, in intercultural-oriented questions, their own culture with the target culture. These kinds of tasks supported learners' motivation, as well as their language skills. Students are aware of the meaningfulness and usability of these tasks, which is also a strong motivational factor. Regarding this, using real sources, e.g. searching for information on the actual websites, publications, etc. is also efficient.

To simulate real communication situations in our courses, a tutor is in the course as a 'communication partner'. This claim supports the tasks from the e-slovak course, for example, *Napište svojmu tútorovi/svojej tútorke, čo ste robili včera* [write to your tutor what you did yesterday]. Feedback from the tutor acts as an elemental communication with students, and it also includes the evaluation of assignments or other tasks, and explaining problems in grammar. Addressing recordings and essays directly to the tutor was for students a motivational factor, which students' final questionnaires proved.

The level of cognitive demands of the task is another factor which influences the successfulness of students in learning a language. In compliance with [Anderson et](#)

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al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy, we assume that the higher level of cognitive demands supports the motivation and involvement of students in no small extent. However, it is essential that the tasks are not overly demanding, because in such a case it causes a reverse effect on learning. Therefore, in the e-slovak courses, we included tasks corresponding to various levels of cognitive demands, going from 'remembering' to 'creating' in the cognitive process dimension, and from 'factual knowledge' to 'procedural knowledge' in the knowledge dimension according to Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy. Regarding the last level of the knowledge dimension, 'metacognitive knowledge' in the e-slovak courses is implicitly included within the whole course. However, the essays and recordings are not individually focussed on it.

## 4. Conclusions

This study has outlined possibilities and conditions in which designers and teachers can support the improvement of productive communication skills and build a complex and balanced communication competence in an e-learning environment. The involvement of recordings and essays in the tutor-supported e-slovak courses A1 and A2, and written or audio feedback by tutors for each assignment, proved to be motivating and beneficial in online teaching and learning. Tasks which cover all levels of Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy support the betterment of all language skills and help to acquire a language more effectively.

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